

108-88-AC
Montrose seeking Iowa "Great Place" status

Gerry Baksys
Staff Writer

Montrose officials believe that their town has what it takes to be named a Great Place in Iowa.

The *Great Place* program was introduced by Gov. Tom Vilsack in March as an attempt to promote Iowa communities, and thus, compliment his *Vision Iowa* program and the *Iowa Values Fund*.

"Great places mean different things to different people," Vilsack said in a statement. "We all know great places in Iowa. We have a responsibility to preserve them, capitalize on them, learn from them, help them become even greater. That's what the *Great Places* initiative will do."

Yvonne Knapp, a member of the Lee County Economic Development Group, has already been working with Montrose Mayor Ron Dinwiddie on gathering information about the program and the potential benefits it can provide the city.

According to Knapp, just participating in the competition process will provide the city with several free services that will benefit the town, even if Montrose is ultimately not picked for the program.

"As I was talking with the mayor about it," Knapp said at the June city council meeting, "it sounds like you talk with someone about all the things you want to get done, and they connect you with someone that can help you do it. Even if you aren't one of

the three places they select, you still have all of this information."

According to an Associated Press article, the *Great Places* project is funded through a \$300,000 grant from the state legislature, plus the resources of the 18 state agencies involved in the program.

The program has a pool of 40 'coaches' - two of which will consult each community

that chooses to participate. From July through August, the coaches will work with the towns to identify what aspects make their town a "Great Place." In addition, the coaches will also connect the town with the state agencies that can make their future or current projects a reality too. The project's goal is to provide communities with "one-stop shopping" assistance.

A Citizen Advisory Board will pick three towns as official *Iowa Great Places* in October.

According to information provided by the program, the *Great Place* Communities will be selected based on seven criteria:

- A unique sense of place
- Engaging experiences
- A rich social fabric
- A vital economy
- A pleasing environment
- A strong foundation
- A creative culture

Dinwiddie acknowledged that just participating in the program would help Montrose, but he added that he would feel better about the community's chance of winning if the program divided the communities by size.

"I would feel much better about it if we were competing against other towns our size," Dinwiddie said. "As it is, we are competing against towns like Waterloo, Cedar Rapids,

and Des Moines."

Knapp, who attended a meeting about the program, said that she still thinks Montrose has a shot at winning.

"I came away with the idea that this is a pilot program

and they are looking for places like Montrose, and other places too, to get a variety of places," she said.

According to Jeff Morgan, a spokesman from the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs, the three towns selected will receive direct support from participating state agencies in making their dreams happen - not just a list of names and phones numbers that all entrants

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receive.

One thing that might help the town set itself apart is the flower planters being installed around town.

According to program coordinator Greg Ruth, there are currently nine flower planters lining First Street and Main Street, but he hopes to expand the program next year.

"We want to work with the homeowners and property owners," Ruth said. "Next year, we hope to have 20 planters."

Ruth said the project is taken on by local Central Lee students who construct the planters as part of their school community service requirements. Montrose Riverfront Inc., is organizing

the project for the Montrose Visioning Committee.

Knapp told the council at the meeting that there might be a new source of revenue to help pay for Montrose's beautification effort

"Catfish Bend Casino has a \$100,000 community grant program every year," Knapp said. "You have enough information to put together a package for \$3-4,000 for signage or anything else for that scenic byway program or anything else you've got enough information on."

Dinwiddie said that the grant could be used for the planter program.

"We could apply for \$1,000 for the planters," Dinwiddie said. "We already have that program started."

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Nine wooden planters with flowers, like the one pictured above, will soon line 1st Street businesses in Montrose. The planters have been constructed by Central Lee High School students to count towards their community service requirement hours. According to Montrose Riverfront Inc. co-chair Kevin Gregory, the project is being organized by his group for the Montrose Visioning Committee. Anyone who wishes to donate money for future planters can leave their money at city hall.